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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECLARATION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF INTOLERANCE AND OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON RELIGION OR BELIEF

Written statement submitted by Bahá'í International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[11 January 1995]

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1. Among the basic human rights, the right to follow one's conscience in matters of religion and belief is undoubtedly one of the most cherished, so much so that people have been willing to endure the severest trials and even to lay down their lives rather than to surrender this fundamental right. And yet throughout history this human right has been frequently and openly violated. Strange indeed that the violators are most often those who consider themselves faithful followers of a religion. Their willingness to trample on the rights of those who believe differently than they do may be best understood as the consequence of two fundamental misconceptions widely perpetrated in the name of religion. The first is that the various religions are separate and competing entities, and that for one religion to be true the others must be false. The second is that certain doctrines and practices held to be false are threatening and must, therefore, be attacked.

2. The Bahá'í International Community would like to suggest that a careful reconsideration of both notions is long overdue. Some fresh thinking on the subject would not only make religious tolerance more palatable to those with strongly held religious beliefs, but it could lead to a genuine appreciation of the various expressions of faith.

3. The concept that all the great religions proceed from the same Source merits serious contemplation. The Bahá'í Writings point out that certain important teachings are found in all religions. For example, the injunction to love one's fellow men echoes throughout all the Holy Writings. The Old Testament enjoins: "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Lev. 19:18). The Bhagavad-Gita, (12:13) instructs: "A man should not hate any living creature. Let him be friendly and compassionate to all." These words sound not so different from "love your enemies, bless them that curse you" as uttered by Jesus (Matthew 5:44). Compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity are said by Buddhist scriptures to be divine conditions of the mind. "Do you love your creator? Love your fellow-beings first," reads a well-known Islamic tradition. And Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith writes: "ye were created to show love to one another and not perversity and rancour. Take pride not in love for yourselves but in love for all mankind" (TB 136). So prominent is the teaching of universal love among all religions that it could be viewed as a goal common to them all. That the basic human virtues - kindness, generosity, humility, trustworthiness - are taught by all religions would also suggest a common origin.

4. Even given the premise that all religions originate from the same Source, there are obvious differences among them which require explanation. According to the Bahá'í Writings, "It is the outward practices of religion that are so different, and it is they that cause disputes and enmity - while the reality is always one and the same. The reality is

the Truth, and truth... is God's guidance, it is the light of the world, it is love, it is mercy" (Paris Talks, 120-121). Many differences are caused by the accretion over time of conflicting ideas and practices. The social teachings, the rituals and observances, which give each religion its distinctive character, can best be understood in the context of the time and place where the religion was revealed. The ability to distinguish between the eternal spiritual truths, on the one hand, and the social instruction specific to a time and place, on the other, makes it possible to appreciate both the unity of religions and their diversity.

5. Legislation can and does suppress both acts of religious persecution and the attitude of religious intolerance itself. As Mr. Arcot Krishnaswami indicates in his *Study of Discrimination in the Matter of Religious Rights and Practices*, "Individuals are inclined to consider wrong what the law prohibits, and right what it enjoins them to do" (63). However, to eradicate religious intolerance at its root, legislation must be supported by education, beginning in primary school.

6. "Schools must first train the children in the principles of religion," says Bahá'u'lláh, "so that the promise and the threat, recorded in the Books of God, may prevent them from the things forbidden and adorn them with the mantle of the commandments; but this in such a measure that it may not injure the children by resulting in ignorant fanaticism and bigotry" (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, 68). Religious education should teach children to manifest the nobility with which they were endowed by a loving God. It should encourage them to cultivate in their own character such divine attributes as compassion, tolerance, justice, righteousness, loyalty, truthfulness, wisdom, and humility. Children who learn to see in all religions the signs of the one Creator, will consider all religions part of a common human heritage, worthy not only of respect but of careful study.

7. The study of the history and culture, if based on the premise of the oneness of humanity, should lead to a growing appreciation of the diverse religious traditions. This appreciation will be strengthened by interaction with people of different faiths, if the purpose is to promote unity. An everyday familiarity with people of different backgrounds will help each individual to lift the veil of cultural difference and see beneath it the shared humanity of all the peoples of the world. "O people! consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship," Bahá'u'lláh commands His followers (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh 22). "Consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord" (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, 36).

8. Those interested in these ideas may well find great encouragement in the experience of the Bahá'í communities. In attempting to put these ideas into practice, the Bahá'í communities are as living laboratories for religious unity; people from every religious tradition meet with the shared intention of establishing and strengthening the ties of unity among them. They gather to worship, to deepen their understanding of spiritual truths, to discover the requirements for social progress, to solve common practical problems, to organize and carry out activities for the welfare of mankind, and, last but not least, simply to enjoy the pleasures of friendship. In these communities religious prejudice has given way to inter-religious brotherhood. They share a common goal: to demonstrate through deeds that the oneness of mankind is a reality and that its fruits are the material, intellectual and spiritual progress of all those who live in its light.

9. As representatives of a community still distressed by intermittent upsurges of religious intolerance, the Bahá'í International Community would like to take this opportunity to thank the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Abdelfatah Amor, for his work and assure him of our continued cooperation. We urge the governments of the world to assist the Special Rapporteur by responding to his questionnaire about methods for combatting religious intolerance.